Methods for Gathering Information and Evidence during Institutional Visits Guide

When serving on a team, you will meet with administrators, faculty, staff, students, and other institutional constituents. During the visit, these meetings are crucial for gathering information, answering questions, and understanding institutional contexts or nuances to inform the team’s report. During the visit, you will not have a lot of time to meet with everyone, so getting the most out of each meeting is essential. This guide is intended to help your team prepare for these meetings and ask questions that will result in useful information.

Planning For and Facilitating Meetings

Prior to the Meetings
• Have clarity about what you are seeking to learn or understand better as a result of each meeting. You may want to confirm or clarify information presented in the institutional report; you may wish to understand internal procedures, or how decisions are made, or how people experience certain aspects of the institution; or you may want to investigate a particular set of practices more deeply. Begin with the end in mind: When the meeting is over, what will you want to have learned?
• Identify a method or strategy to best meet your needs. (See “Methods” below.)
• Develop questions and possible follow-up questions accordingly in advance of the meeting. If you have 3-5 key questions prepared, you can use them to help guide the conversation to ensure that you leave the meeting having learned what you wanted to learn.

During the Meetings
• Identify in advance one team member who will set the stage for each meeting by asking for introductions, sharing the general purpose of the WSCUC visit and this specific meeting, and stating what the team is hoping to learn as a result. This will prepare participants for the nature of the meeting and will help prevent meeting hijackers (people who come to a meeting with their own agendas).
• Develop rapport with the people you are meeting with by exhibiting objectivity, fairness, courtesy, and respect for their time, expertise, and various points-of-view.
• Reference reports or documents the institution has submitted if helpful.
• In group meetings, manage participants who over- or under-participate by asking a question such as: “I would love to hear some other voices on this topic – would someone else be willing to share their perspective or experience?”
• Prior to asking a question, you could informally poll participants to get a sense of participation or agreement with a statement.
  o Example: “How many of you have attended a faculty meeting in the last year?” prior to asking, “Can you tell us about how the agendas of these meetings are determined?”
• Listen carefully and confirm your understanding by paraphrasing back to participants what you think you heard.
• Take notes so you can refer to them when writing the team report.
• Conclude by giving the participants the opportunity to share anything else (positive or negative) that may be relevant.
  o Example: “Is there anything else you think would be helpful for our team to know about your institution?” or more specifically, “Is there anything else about how your institution works to retain your students that you think would be helpful for us to know about?”
• Identify any high-priority follow-up questions you may have for particular individuals and groups; you may be able to find time during the visit for additional meetings if the team deems it necessary.
Some Methods for Gathering Information and Evidence in Meetings

1. **Interviews**

Interviews are small meetings, usually between one or two team members and one or two representatives of the institution. Interviewing has traditionally been the backbone of the visit, and it remains useful, even though teams must also use other methods of gathering information. Here are some ways to make the interview as productive as possible:

1. Together with your team, plan what you would like to get out of the interview.

2. Prepare a set of questions.

3. Start with the easier questions to break the ice; work up to more challenging, uncomfortable ones.

4. Questions can be:
   - Broad: *What happened here when the president suddenly died?*
   - Narrow: *How did you manage the capital campaign after the president’s untimely death?*

5. In a rough parallel to Bloom’s taxonomy, you can formulate questions that elicit information (descriptive questions), stimulate analysis (cause-and-effect questions), or require evaluative judgments (normative questions). For example:
   - Descriptive questions: “How do your transfer students fulfill their general education requirements?”
   - Cause-and-effect: “Why do some transfer students do so well and others have such problems with general education outcomes?
   - Normative questions: “How well do transfer students meet your expectations for general education outcomes?”

6. Beware the typical pitfalls of interviewing
   - Avoid binary, yes/no questions when possible.
   - Avoid “all” or “none” questions: Instead of “Are all your students exposed to diversity through the curriculum?” it’s more informative to ask: “What percentage of your students takes courses with diversity content?”
   - Avoid leading questions: “So when did your faculty finally get on board with assessment?”
   - Avoid putting words in the interviewee’s mouth: “Introducing assessment was a nightmare, wasn’t it?”
   - Avoid double-barreled questions; they produce one answer to two questions: “Did your students participate in service learning projects and become much more committed to civic values?”
   - Avoid language that suggests a socially acceptable answer: “Just about every institution is doing assessment now. How about you?”
   - Avoid loaded words: “dead wood,” “mindless bureaucrats,” “stupid turf wars,” and the like.

7. Follow the plan for the interview, but not slavishly: if the question isn’t understood, paraphrase; if a new topic comes up that may be relevant, pursue it.
8. Let the interviewee do the talking; don’t interrupt except for quick clarifications.

9. Feel free to steer the conversation back to the topic if the interviewee is wandering.

10. Avoid the temptation to act as a consultant and give advice.

11. Do ask the “debriefing” question at the end: “Is there anything else you’d like to say?”

12. Remain friendly and attentive but neutral.

13. Be aware of your own body language and your interviewee’s.

14. Take good notes.

**Tips for Effective Interview Questions:**

- **Open, not closed:** Open questions are designed to encourage narrative on the part of the interviewee and conversation. Closed questions typically result in a precise answer, such as “Yes” or “No.”
  - Example: (to students) “What are the qualities of your school that you like best and why?” versus “Do you like your school?”

- **Phrased to understand, not to judge:** Most often you will be seeking to learn more about the institution so that later—when you write the team report—you may make informed judgments. Questions phrased to illicit explanation versus those that hint or state pre-conceived judgments may result in more useful and meaningful information.
  - Example: (to a faculty committee) “Tell me about how the committee went about formulating this policy. What were the important considerations and decisions you made?” versus “What were you thinking when you included the phrase about compensation in the policy? It doesn’t seem relevant.”

- **Focused and rigorous, versus “beating around the bush”:** If there is specific information you are seeking, be focused in your questions versus hoping that participants can guess what you’re trying to learn.
  - Example: “Please explain how you selected the members of your advisory boards – what kinds of people were you seeking and why?” versus “Tell me about your advisory boards.”

- **Ask for concrete examples:** Concrete examples will provide you with a glimpse into the specific practices of the institution (what they do, which may be different from what they say they do).
  - Example: (to students) “What are some specific experiences you have had with your advisor that have helped you succeed here?” and “Please walk us through the orientation you had as a new student here.”
  - Example: (to faculty) “What are some specific learning assessment activities that you’ve participated in? What did you do?” and “Tell me about the last 3 issues that the faculty senate has acted on recently – what were they, and how did the decision-making process work?”
Some Audience-Specific Sample Interview Questions:
Possible Questions for Faculty
- What student learning outcomes do the courses you teach support?
- What are some example tools and processes you use to assess student learning?
- What changes have been made (to your program) as a result of assessing student learning outcomes?
- How do you assure that students have achieved the desired learning outcomes you have set for them?
- To what extent are you involved in program review? How?
- What are some specific ways that the program you teach in has been improved? What has led to these improvements?
- What kinds of professional development resources does the institution provide faculty?
- What are the timeline, process, and criteria by which you are evaluated?
- How do new programs or curricular changes come about? What are some specific examples?
- How well are student services and academic support departments providing appropriate educational services for your students? What are some examples of effective programs?

Possible Questions for Students
- What skills and knowledge are you expected to acquire as an undergraduate at this college/university?
- How did you learn about what outcomes are expected of you?
- Are you acquiring the skills and knowledge you are expected to acquire?
- To what extent is the faculty available and helpful to you?
- Why did you choose this college/university?
- What do you like best about this college/university? What could be improved to provide a better educational experience?
- Would you recommend this institution to a friend? Why or why not?
- What, if anything, has been different from how the institution describes itself on its website and in its materials?
- Either you or your family is paying for this education. Are you getting your money’s worth? Why / why not?

Possible Questions for the Board of Trustees
- What about the institution are you most proud of as a board member?
- As a board member, what keeps you up at night?
- What significant changes have you seen in the past # years? Why were they made, and how effective have they been?
- What is your vision for this institution? Where would you like to see it in five years?
- How does the board ensure the long term sustainability of the institution? How is the board addressing the changing ecology of higher education?
- Tell us about the process you have in place to review the president's performance.
- What are the biggest challenges facing the institution at this time? How will those challenges be addressed?
- What are the biggest challenges facing the board at this time? How will those challenges be addressed?
- What are the non-financial measures that this board is focused on?
- How do you know if the board is being effective?
- How has the board been involved in the self-study process for accreditation? What do you see the value of accreditation being for the institution?

II. Large Group Meetings
Institutions often arrange open meetings so that the team can interact with faculty, students, staff, and other constituencies. These meetings can be useful but they also entail risks: the audience may be unrepresentative, discussion may be dominated by a few strong personalities, the range of topics may end up very narrow, and team members may not be able to steer discussion toward the issues they most want to hear about. Here are some techniques for structuring a large meeting.

Use these techniques to make large group meetings productive:

1. The instant mini-survey: Distribute 3”x5” cards and ask everyone in the room to write the answers to two questions, e.g., “What is the best thing about this institution?” and “What would you change?” Team members collect and sort the cards into topics while another team member explains the team’s role in the accreditation process. Then discussion can be guided by the issues that attendees themselves have raised. Periodically the team leader has a reason to say “Well, let’s move on now to another topic here.... “

2. Listing: At the beginning of the meeting, the team leader can invite suggestions from the floor for topics that should be covered and can use a flip chart or board to list them, and then refer back to the list periodically.

3. Stacking: If a lot of people want to speak on the same topic at the same time, the team leader can ask them to raise their hands, count off, then speak in that order to the end of the “stack.”

4. Bundling: If a lot of people want to speak on various topics, the team leader can sort them out by announcing the first topic, asking people to remain standing at the microphone who want to speak to it, and requesting that later speakers not repeat what’s been said by earlier speakers. Then the group moves on to other topics.

5. Straw poll: This is an informal vote or show of hands. It can help a team to get a feel for the audience at the beginning of a session (“How many of you students started here? Show of hands? And how many are transfers?”) or to get a sense of the room at the end of a lively discussion (“So how many of you now think there should be more online course offerings?”). The important thing is to keep the questions simple and the procedure informal and non-binding. It should not be used if there is any danger of isolating or intimidating a minority.

6. Small group discussion: The team can come with a prepared exercise, e.g., a short survey (5 questions), ask people to divide into groups, fill it out, discuss their answers in small groups, and then report back to the full group. A variation is small-group brainstorming, for example on a topic like “What would take this place from good to great?” Small groups do require advance planning.

7. Go-round: This works best if the group is relatively small to begin with and chairs can be arranged in a circle. The team leader throws out a question and then goes around the room inviting everyone to answer briefly. This technique gives everyone an equal chance to respond. It can break the ice and be used for the first part of a meeting, before turning to a more open discussion format.

III. Fishbowl
This is a special form of small group discussion named after the way people watch fish in a fishbowl. It consists of a small inner group and a larger outer group of participants, usually arranged in concentric circles. The inner group engages in a discussion of some topic while the outer group observes the interaction. At a predetermined point, the action stops and a debriefing follow. The observers may share
questions and observations with the inner group, or the inner group members may discuss what they have been doing first, before turning to the observers.

WSCUC teams have used the fishbowl in place of a traditional meeting with a committee in order to gain insight into how the committee conducts its business and what the range of opinion is on topics of concern. The fishbowl is best used with forewarning and with a group of people who are used to working with one another.

IV. Audit Approach
The audit can be used by any team as the main technique for organizing a visit or as one approach among several, depending on the questions the team seeks to answer.

Background: Different types of academic audits are currently in use in the British Quality Assurance Process, the Hong Kong Teaching Learning Quality Process Review (TLQPR), and the accreditation process of the Teacher Educational Accreditation Council (TEAC). The Irish and Danish educational systems are also using variations of the audit for assessing institutional quality assurance systems.

Three Ways a Team Can Use the Audit:
1. **As a means of verification and validation.** Is what the institution asserts about student learning and educational effectiveness (or other priorities) really happening? Using this approach, a team can “develop an audit trail” by undertaking transcript analyses or reviews of student and faculty files, or by following several students through their career (transfer and native). Such reviews can help determine whether policies and procedures have been followed; they can help the team determine what kind of evidence is routinely available; and they provide material for a narrative about how student work has been evaluated.

2. **As a means to determine the learning-centeredness of core processes.** Good educational results come from sound academic processes that are aligned to generate learning. Core process reviews enable a team to move beyond the asset inventory or input approach (“they have this activity/process, so it must work”) and probe whether the process/activity is actually supporting the stated learning objectives. For example, teams can review the effectiveness of such core processes as course approval, institutional research and assessment, faculty orientation, faculty development, and program review. The specific focus is on how each activity contributes to learning and is aligned with the institution’s overall goals. The approach can be adapted to other questions, too.

3. **As a means to determine the “range of variability” across the institution.** The audit is an effective way for a team (or the institution) to assess the consistency of a process (e.g., program review) across the institution. Teams can review how program reviews are conducted in different departments and how the results are used.